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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a study of teachers' attitudes toward implementation of social skills instruction. Twenty-eight regular and special education teachers from a rural southwestern high school voluntarily responded to a questionnaire. Teachers reported a preference for proactive, comprehensive social skills activities implemented as part of a standard program. Teachers were split between wanting to conduct social skills instruction as a discrete content area and wanting to integrate social skills instruction with other content areas. Resources to support social skills instruction, availability of inservice training, and time for planning social skills activities were lacking. Teachers reported that their family backgrounds and experiences as educators had been most helpful in developing support of social skills instruction. While a few teachers felt that social skills instruction should not be their responsibility for mainstreamed handicapped children, the majority felt it should be a shared responsibility between special educators and regular educators. Recommendations include: (1) focusing teacher preservice and inservice programs on development of social skills instruction and curriculum development; and (2) providing experiences for preservice teacher education students to participate in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of social skills instruction programs. (LP)

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Social Skills Instruction in Rural Schools: Factors Effecting Implementation

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Social Skills Instruction in Rural Schools: Factors Effecting Implementation

Introduction

There is much concern about the way in which social skills instruction is approached within secondary education (Kain, Downs and Black, 1988; Gerler, 1986; Cartledge and Milburn, 1980). Social skills deficits are viewed as contributing factors to the vast social problems of youth in our country. Violent crime, racial and ethnic discrimination, post high school unemployment , teenage pregnancy, teenage suicide, substance abuse and general social maladaptation contribute to a nationwide concern for our youth (Gates, 1988; Orr, 1987; Soderberg, 1988). It is agreed that skills critical to the proper social adjustment are not sufficiently developed for many of our nation's youth (Lecroy, 1983). Many of our schools have concentrated on efforts to enhance performance in traditional academic subjects by implementing competency requirements. There have also been efforts at curriculum and materials development (Walker, 1983). But there is little data which indicates that comprehensive social skills curriculum are being implemented. In fact, very little effort has been provided systematically to improve the area of social skills functioning in our schools. This is apparent in our rural schools as well as non-rural schools.

This paper focuses on a description of factors which have been found to effect the implementation of social skills instruction in a selected rural secondary school setting. The purpose of this study was to begin to gather data on the existing capacity to provide social skills instruction, and to begin to assess factors which might have positive potential for improving social skills instruction for students with learning and behavioral disabilities in our rural schools.

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Method

Subjects

Twenty-eight teachers from a multi-ethnic, rural, southwestern high school voluntarily responded to a questionnaire designed by the authors. Twenty-two of the teachers were part of the regular education faculty, and had teaching experience ranging from 1 to 26 years with an average of 12.8 years. Five respondents were special educators, and had teaching experience ranging from 1 to 13 years with an average of 6.0 years. All respondents taught at the same school location.

Instrumentation

The instrument was developed with items in multiple choice, multiple selection, and Likert scale formats. It assessed the respondents' current and ideal levels of involvement with social skills curriculum and instruction, and the resources, skills, and values that influenced their activities.

Respondents were asked to indicate their highest current level of social skills activity by selecting one of a series of options that described their best efforts in this area. Items were scaled on the basis of the implied level of engagement with social skills instruction. On one end of the continuum, alternatives reflected proactive approaches to social skills instruction; that is, social skills instruction that was implemented as part of the standard program. The other end of the scale reflected more reactive options of teacher behavior, as in response to emergency classroom situations. Additionally, items were scaled to reflect the comprehensiveness with which social skills instruction was presented within the curriculum. In addition to current level of social skill activity, teachers were asked to select one of the options to describe their ideal level of social skill activity.

The instrument also assessed the resources available to teachers, their knowledge and skills regarding social skills instruction, and the values they attributed to this instruction. Teachers responded to these factors by indicating whether each enhanced, inhibited, or had no effect on their current social skills activities. Lastly, respondent perceptions of responsibilities for social skills instruction to meet the needs of handicapped students in rural mainstream settings were ascertained.

RESULTS

1. Respondents reported a desire to be more engaged in proactive, comprehensive social skills activities than they were in their current situation .

2. Respopndents who wanted to be engaged in more proactive types of social skills activities were fairly evenly split between wanting to conduct social skills instruction as a discrete content area (46%) and wanting to integrate social skills instruction within other content areas (50%).

3. Interestingly, three of the five special education teachers indicated that their current social skills activities were primarily reactive(either in-class crisis intervention or referral for outside resources); nine mainstream teachers also reported primarily a reactive approach to social skills needs .

4. Respondents reported little access to resources that could support social skills instruction. A majority of respondents (60.71%) stated that no resources were available to them; this included 2 special education and 15 regular education teachers.

5. None of the teachers reported receiving assistance through inservice training or release time.

6. Differences were found between special and regular educator ratings of the importance of competencies for planning social skills instruction, with special educators placing a higher value on social skills planning and provision of instruction.

7. Respondent ratings of the importance of knowledge and competencies related to social skills instruction were higher than their ratings of the current level of knowledge and skills.

8. Factors indicated as contributing the most to teacher competency development in social skill instruction were a) direct experience, and b) family background.

Benefits of Social Skill Instruction

Teachers were asked to identify benefits associated with social skills instruction. Statistical differences were not found between regular and special educators . All respondents perceived benefits resulted from social skills instruction. Percieved positive effects were reported in student-

teacher relationships, student-peer relationships, enhanced self-concept for the students themselves, and improvements in the social climate of the school.

Factors Influencing Social Skills Activities

A vast majority of the respondents indicated that neither school policies , instructional resources,nor preservice training had very much impact on their current levels of activities in providing social skill instruction. They did however report that personal philosophy had the greatest positive impact on their current social skills instruction activities.

Responsibility For Social Skills Instruction

Respondents were asked to indicate who they felt should be responsible for social skills instruction, specifically for students with learning and behavioral disabilities in the mainstream. A majority of teachers felt that the responsibility should be shared by both regular and special educators. Regular education teachers did vary in their responses about maintaining sole responsibility for social skills instruction or delegating it to special education. One special education teacher indicated that this instruction should not be the primary responsibility of either group of teachers.

DISCUSSION

Teachers in this study were aware of the dimensions of social skills problems that students experienced both within the rural secondary school and community setting. Furthermore, they were aware of the potential positive impact social skills instruction might have on their students both within school and in the community. They prefered positive, proactive approaches to social skills development as opposed to reactive responses to problems that occur in the school setting. The teachers at this school prefered to be more involved in the social skills needs of their students than was evident in their existing instructional programs.

Teachers in this study expressed a lack of agreement with respect to the desired curricular configuration for implementation of social skills instruction. They were divided as to whether it should be offered as a a discrete content area or integrated with other content areas. In addition to a need for further study to help determine best practices in this area, this perhaps indicates a need for consideration of both types of delivery systems within teacher training programs that are currently

attempting to meet teachers' needs in this area. This might include: knowledge and skills in assessing social skills, planning social skills instruction, providing social skills instruction, evaluating student acquisition of social skills, and communicating with professionals and parents.

Resources to support social skills instruction were found to be lacking. While a range of instructional materials are available on the market, only one fifth of the teachers in this study reported that they had printed material to support social skills instruction. Perhaps teachers need assistance in locating materials which are appropriate for their programs and which are available to them.

Lack of inservice training and release time for planning social skills instruction characterized the experience of these teachers. This may be a reflection of the level of school commitment to social skills instruction.

Teachers indicated that their family background and direct experiences as educators had been the most helpful in developing their skills in support of social skills instruction. In addition to identifying a lack of formal training opportunities currently available to teachers, data suggest a need to consider and hopefully incorporate direct experience with social skills instruction into teacher trainees' courses of study.

Teachers perceived social skills instruction as beneficial, both for enhancing the self-concept of students and for improving their social relationships in the school and in the community. A majority of teachers felt that social skills instruction should be the shared responsibility of both special educators and regular educators. A few teachers did not perceive that social skills instruction was within their purview. This indicates a need to clarify the role of the teacher as well as to address the importance of social skills development as part of our teacher preparation programs in both special and regular education.

Implications

This study was conducted on a very limited rural population, and therefore the rersults may not generalize to other rural settings. However, our limited data suggest consideration of the following recommendations for professionals engaged in rural, secondary level programs in special and regular education.

Preservice and inservice programs should consider instruction in the foundations of social skills and curriculum development; the curriculum could include areas such as the assessment of social skills, instructional planning, program implementation, and materials development.

Teacher preparation programs in both special education and regular education should include early and frequent experiences for pre-service students to observe and participate in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of social skills instruction in a variety of school and community settings.

Both regular education and special education teachers should be skilled in facilitating change in the school curriculum to more visibly and forcefully reflect the importance of social skill development for all students. It is suggested that a proactive approach to social skills instruction and development will better prepare students to perform within the classroom as well as when they face the challenges of life once they leave the formal school setting.

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